Opening Remarks of Chairman John L Mica

This afternoon's hearing will focus on oversight of the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) safety programs. We are conducting this hearing at a time when America's aviation system has been safer than any time in our history. The remarkable safety record achieved in the last several years is the result of sound safety policy and continuous oversight.

Safety is the number one priority of this Subcommittee, the FAA, and the users of the aviation system. That is why the U.S. aviation system is the safest in the world.

(Slide of safety statistics displayed)

That safety record is clearly reflected by this table with data from the Aviation Safety Network of the Flight Safety Foundation, an independent, nonprofit, international organization engaged in research, auditing, education, advocacy and publishing to improve aviation safety. The table sets forth the "Percentage of World Departures vs. Percentage of accidents by International Region." Even though 42 percent of the world's departures are in the North American Region, North America accounts for only 8.6 percent of the world's accidents.

Aviation is also by far the safest form of transportation in the United States. You are about 40 times safer in an airliner than on the safest stretch of highway in the country. Today and everyday of the year unfortunately more than 100 people die in automobile accidents.

Since 2001, the FAA has handled 50 million successful flights with 2.7 billion passengers flying on commercial aircraft in the United States and arriving safely at their final destinations.

This safety record is all the more amazing when you consider how incredibly complicated the U.S. aviation system is. On a typical weekday in the U. S., there is an average of:

- 33,000 commercial airline, and
- 55,000 Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) departures.

(Slide of aviation accident statistics displayed)

The following graph, from the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association's (AOPA) website, represents the latest statistical data available from the NTSB and is current through August 25, 2006. The data includes both fatal and nonfatal accidents. This graph shows "the year-to-date change of accident counts compared to the previous year."

With the exception of Business and Corporate/Executive operations, all other types of operations including commercial and general aviation have seen a reduction in the number of accidents compared to the same time period in 2005.

Let me just mention a few other areas where safety has improved:

- The fatal accident rate for commercial carriers is down. Ten years ago the rate was 0.51 fatal accidents per 100,000 departures. Today, the rate is 0.023.

- General aviation fatal accidents rates have also dropped. The number of fatal accidents through May 2006 is 36 less than the same time period in 2005.

- Emergency Medical Service aircraft accidents have been cut in half in one year from 2005 and 2006.

We are all aware that the risks associated with flight cannot be eliminated completely. The Comair accident in Lexington, Kentucky last month is a sobering

reminder of that fact. So, while flying is by far the safest mode of transportation, we must continue to strive for an ever safer aviation system.

The witnesses for today's hearing will provide detailed testimony on the aviation industry safety record as well as issues that they believe should be addressed, including runway safety, operational errors, training, inspection processes, aging aircraft, center fuel tanks, air tours and emergency medical service flights.

They will also highlight emerging issues they believe will require our attention as the system continues to expand; areas such as very light jets, unmanned aircraft systems, and commercial space transportation.

These are all very important issues for the Aviation Subcommittee in particular as we assess the continued safe operation of the National Airspace System (NAS).

Another emerging issue that has been the subject of much review is ensuring that we have adequate air traffic control and safety inspector staffing levels to deal with expected retirements and the growing use of the airspace system.

This discussion should include not only FAA's Workforce Plan and staffing models, but also ways to create efficiencies, such as consolidating FAA facilities and expanding the FAA Contract Tower Program.

In particular, I believe we should closely examine the benefits, both in terms of safety and funding, of consolidating FAA Terminal Radar Approach Control facilities (TRACONs).

Due to improvements in technology, the FAA is able to consolidate TRACONs that are located in close proximity to one another and whose separate operation is highly inefficient. The benefits of TRACON consolidation include, reducing controller workload, decreasing facility overhead staffing requirements, and enhancing safety and efficiency within the system and provide better redundancy.

Another hugely beneficial program in terms of meeting future staffing needs is the FAA Contract Tower Program. Currently, 231 airports in 46 states participate in the program. This represents 45 percent of all control towers in the United States.

The safety and efficiency record of the Contract Tower Program for the past two decades has been validated numerous times. It is not just me saying this; in fact the Department of Transportation Inspector General (DOT IG) has reviewed the Contract Tower Program and found, I quote:

> -- In April 2000: "…contract towers continue to provide services that are comparable to the quality and safety of FAA-operated towers. Users remain supportive of the Program….The Program has been successful in providing air traffic control services at low activity airports at lower costs than the agency could otherwise provide".
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> -- In September 2003, "…in terms of safety of operations as measured by operational errors/deviations, both the contact towers and the FAA-staff VFR towers fell well below FAA's FY 2002 overall average of 6.7 operational errors for every 1 million operations handled. We found that contract controllers met qualification requirements and received required training, and users were satisfied with the services they received at contract locations."

Additionally, the Contract Tower Program saves Federal and local taxpayers up to $300 million annually.

Both the Contract Tower Program and TRACON consolidation deserve due consideration as we evaluate the best ways to ensure adequate staffing in the future.

In terms of ensuring aviation safety, no one would argue that air traffic controllers don't have an important, and at times, very stressful job. That is why air traffic controllers are now one of the highest paid employee groups in the entire Federal Government.

This Subcommittee has been closely monitoring FAA staffing and hiring plans and, in fact, held a hearing on this topic.

Since 2001, the FAA has hired 2,500 controllers. To date, the FAA has hired 920 controllers and expects to hire a total of 1,100 in fiscal year 2006 alone. The FAA's fiscal year 2006 on board staffing target is 14,670 controllers. This reflects a ramping up of hiring in order to replace controllers who FAA anticipates will retire in the next few years. As of September 3rd, there were 14,537 controllers on board. The FAA expects to meet its staffing goal by the end of the September.

Unfortunately, it appears some have chosen to use the tragedy of the Lexington, Kentucky Comair crash in August to forward their own agenda. It is important to note that the accident investigation is still ongoing, and the NTSB has not reached any conclusion as to the cause of the accident. It is also important to note that we have over 100 commercial air service airports with no tower controllers that function well.

I believe that efforts to make that accident and the tragic loss of life that occurred on that day a sounding board for one's own agenda to be in the poorest of taste. I am confident that the NTSB will consider all factors, eliminating some and drawing appropriate conclusions about others. Second guessing and sharing piecemeal bits of information is not only inappropriate, it is dangerous.

Today's witnesses will highlight areas where they believe we can improve the safety of our already very safe aviation system. This is a healthy exercise in preparing next year's FAA Reauthorization.

As we engage in discussing the important safety issues today, I want to ask that Members not lose sight of the fact that the United States has the safest aviation system in the world and in fact, FAA safety standards are recognized as a 'gold standard' worldwide.